

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Eight Sunday after Pentecost
August 3, 2025
9:30 AM

Text: Exodus 20:14 & Matthew 5:27-30

Theme: Faithfulness: Do Not Commit Adultery

[prayer]

Let's just get it out there: This is a sermon about sex. Because sexual ethics is a complex and emotionally charged topic, there are things I will not say today because we simply do not have the time, or this is not the appropriate space for that conversation. So, if you find yourself thinking about particular scenarios or experiences and wondering *Why didn't the pastor say this?* or *What about that?* or even *I really disagree*, I encourage you to seek me out and make an appointment to discuss your questions. My goal for this sermon is that you will understand the theological and ethical lens through which the church views its teachings on sex, including the seventh commandment. But there is always more that can be said, which is one of the challenges of preaching – knowing when enough has been said for a single Sunday.

I have observed that when it comes to the topic of sex, the church tends toward one of two extremes. Either there is a damaging overemphasis on sexual purity, or the topic is hardly spoken of at all. In the former case, it can feel like the church is intruding on the privacy of our bedrooms. In the latter case, we are ignoring what Scripture says about sex. In either case, we discredit a fundamental theological truth: Sex is a gift from God.

How do we receive a gift from someone we love? With gratitude and delight! There is nothing inherently sinful about sex. I say this for those who have been taught to think of it as something dirty and shameful, something secret, something to hide. It is not any of those things. As Jesus teaches, sex only becomes those things when the attitude of our hearts makes it so.

On the other hand, for those who believe and act like God has nothing to do with their sex lives, a gentle reminder that God created sex, so God absolutely has something to say about it. Like every good gift from God, sex should be treated with respect and stewarded carefully.

I want you to hold onto this idea of sex as a gift as we consider the seventh commandment. We have established that the second tablet of the Decalogue is all about our relationships with each other. How do we love our neighbor well? How do we love our neighbor as ourselves?

The commandment against adultery immediately follows the commandment against murder, which demonstrates the severity of this transgression. Both commandments are based in the sanctity of our bodies, bodies God has made, bodies that reflect His divine image and character. Our bodies possess some of God's creative power. We have the capacity for a powerful and sacred intimacy that reflects the intimacy God shares with His creation. This intimacy has procreative power (the power to create life), but more importantly it has the power to create and sustain deep, nurturing, mutually loving relationships.

The commandment against adultery, then, is not just about not abusing God's gift of sex. It is about not abusing the image of God in each other. Infidelity was common in the ancient world, and it remains common today. The General Social Survey, published by the University of Chicago, has tracked Americans' attitudes, behaviors, and opinions on a wide range of topics since 1972. Its data shows that while most Americans agree that infidelity is wrong, many still have affairs: Roughly 16 percent of those in their sixties and seventies, 12 percent in their fifties, and 10 percent in their twenties, thirties, and forties.¹ Ashley Madison – a website explicitly for married people to meet and have affairs – currently boasts sixty-five million users.

God desires relationships that are mutually loving and serve the image of God in each other. In the Genesis 1 account of creation, men and women are created at the same time, equally in God's image. Even in the Genesis 2 account, where the woman is created after the man, she is created not as a subordinate to him, but as a partner. Adam needs a companion that shares the same human traits as him.

¹ <https://gss.norc.uchicago.edu/>. As cited by Adam Hamilton in *Words of Life: Jesus and the Promise of the Ten Commandments Today* (New York: Convergent Books, 2020), 148.

And so, God creates Eve from one of Adam's ribs. These first two humans literally share a piece of each other. They belong to each other. What makes Eve 'good' in Adam's eyes is not primarily her femaleness but her *humanity*. Adam sees in her a reflection of his *own* humanity. He sees the same divine image that is inside him. In great joy and wonder, he says to Eve:

"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh." (Gene 2:23 NRSVUE)

The first words that a human being speaks in the Bible are profound words of recognition, one human being to another. A spark of the divine resides inside each of us. Like Adam to Eve, when we enter mutually loving relationships with each other, my spark greets your spark, saying *I see you. You are mine and I am yours. We belong to each other, because we both belong to God.*

The creation narrative reminds us to reverence and serve the image of God in each other out of respect for our Creator. The intimacy of the sexual relationship between two consenting adults should reinforce the sacredness of this image. But instead of reverencing the *imago dei*, adultery objectifies it. The most famous example of adultery in Scripture is the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12). King David sees Bathsheba bathing on a roof in the cool of the evening. Instead of dignifying her body by averting his eyes, he lusts after her, eventually summoning her to the palace to sleep with her. Never mind that Bathsheba is married to one of David's military commanders. Never mind that David holds authority over Bathsheba - could she realistically say no to him? Never mind that David, a man "after God's own heart" (1 Sam 13:14 NRSVUE), surely knows the seventh commandment. He ignores all this and gives into his desires.

The Letter of James says, "Everyone is tempted by their own cravings; they are lured away and enticed by them. Once those cravings conceive, they give birth to sin; and when sin grows up, it gives birth to death" (1:14-15 CEB). David's sin, conceived in adultery, eventually gave birth to the murder of Uriah and the premature death of his infant son, born out of wedlock with Bathsheba.

The sexual sin in our culture is rooted in the objectification of the human body. Powerful men preying on powerless women. Adults preying on children. Pornography. Intimate partner violence. Sexual harassment. Sexual assault. Rape.

None of these things reflect the kind of healthy, mutually loving relationships God desires for us. They are all about using the bodies of other people solely to satisfy our own desires, whether sexual or otherwise.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes the seventh commandment and he radicalizes it. “I say to you that every man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart. And if your right eye causes you to fall into sin, tear it out and throw it away. It’s better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to fall into sin, chop it off and throw it away. It’s better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body go into hell” (vv. 28-30).

Jesus says that adultery is not merely the act of sex with someone who is not your wife. Adultery is also in the illicit desire, whether you act on it or not. Jesus specifically calls out men, who held immense power over women in the ancient world. But because the creation accounts teach equality between human beings made in the image of God, Jesus’s teaching applies equally to men and women, straight and gay, and the entire spectrum in between. If you look at someone with lust in your heart – if you reduce another person’s body to an object to satisfy your desires – then you are breaking the seventh commandment, even if you never touch them. This is why the United Methodist Church views the use of pornography as a form of sexual misconduct for laity and clergy alike.²

Does Jesus really want us to pluck out our eyes and cut off our hands if we entertain illicit sexual thoughts? No. Jesus frequently used hyperbole to underscore the seriousness of his point. Jesus is saying that when we prioritize our own sexual desire over the image of God in another person, it will have destructive consequences. The story of David and Bathsheba is a cautionary tale.

We are called to honor the image of God in each other. It was not that long ago that marriage vows included this phrase: “With my body I thee worship.”³ This vow was a bold declaration of physical intimacy as an act of devotion toward another person.

² <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/partners/um-sexual-ethics/home/resources/definitions-and-social-principles>

³ <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/form-solemnization-matrimony>

I want to acknowledge that conversations about sex can carry a lot of emotional baggage, especially in the church, which admittedly does not have a good history of teaching about sex with fairness and compassion. Our humanity is messy and that includes our sexuality. It helps to remember that Jesus did not come to help us escape our humanity. Jesus came to redeem our humanity and restore it as God intended. That includes our sex lives. If we truly embrace the miracle of the Incarnation, then we can believe that Jesus felt in his own body the power and the temptation of sexual desire, meaning that we can trust him to understand our physical longings and the times we fall short of the high standards he has set.

In the face of sexual sin, Jesus does not offer condemnation, but grace and forgiveness. In John 8, we read the story of the woman caught in adultery. According to the Law of Moses, adultery was such a serious violation of God's will for human relationships that it was punishable with death by stoning (Lev 20:10, Deut 22:22). The legal experts and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery to Jesus. They wanted to see if Jesus would condemn her according to the Law. But Scripture says that

Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground with his finger.

They continued to question him, so he stood up and replied, "Whoever hasn't sinned should throw the first stone." Bending down again, he wrote on the ground. Those who heard him went away, one by one, beginning with the elders. Finally, only Jesus and the woman were left in the middle of the crowd.

Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Is there no one to condemn you?"

She said, "No one, sir."

Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, don't sin anymore."

It is a mystery what Jesus wrote in the dirt that day. Jerome, writing in the fourth or early fifth century, speculated that he was listing the sins of the religious leaders who came to accuse the woman.

Frequently in the Old Testament adultery is used as a metaphor to describe Israel's infidelity toward Yahweh. Over and over Israel would turn to foreign gods and forget the God who set them free from slavery and sought to teach them how to love one another. But also over and over Scripture declares that God is rich in mercy and abounding in steadfast love (Ex 34:6). God is faithful toward us despite our infidelity to Him. His faithfulness is, perhaps, His most enduring characteristic. And as people made in His image, it should be one of our most enduring characteristics, too. Whether we are married or otherwise, we are all called to be faithful in honoring and serving the image of God in each other. We are all called to be faithful in practicing the law of love.

Amen.